

Alcibiades

David Gribble

'In the fifth century B.C. against the background of perpetually warring Greek city-states, one man towered above the chaos. His name was Alcibiades: citizen of Athens, friend of Socrates, sailor, warrior and inveterate lover.'

Who is this extraordinary figure? First and foremost, the most important Athenian leader of the years from 416 to 404, the years which saw the end of the Athenian empire at the hands of Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. But Alcibiades had more success as a lover than he did as a general or as a politician; he was largely responsible for the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, and he managed to have himself exiled from Athens not just once but twice. He has also generated countless literary portrayals from Plato and Thucydides down to the present day: for example Rosemary Sutcliff's novel, *The Flowers of Adonis*, from the back cover of which my opening quote is taken. What have all these authors found so fascinating about Alcibiades?

The story of his life

For one thing, the incredible story of his life. Elected general of the Sicilian expedition in 416 B.C., he was recalled soon after taking command to answer charges of sacrilege. Rather than face trial, he fled into exile and was condemned to death in his absence. He then proceeded to throw in his lot with the Spartans and the Persians, using his knowledge and talents in the service of Athens' enemies. But his aim was not just to damage his country out of spite: he also wanted to demonstrate to the Athenians how dangerous an enemy and how necessary a friend he was, so that they would have no alternative but to have him back. For, in a bizarre way, Alcibiades clearly loved his native city. The plan worked: he was recalled and made Supreme General by the Athenians. But before a year was out, other mistakes followed and he was deposed again (407). Alcibiades was never to return to Athens, though he had the satisfaction of personally witnessing his successor as General bring about the ruin of Athens at the battle of Aegospotami in 404. Before long Alcibiades too was dead, murdered by person or persons unknown.

If Alcibiades' political career was dominated by a sequence of extraordinary changes of mind towards him on the part of his fellow citizens, his *private* life was just as extraordinary (and here we find perhaps the other component of his interest as a subject for literary depiction). In fact, as we will see in a moment, a closer look at Alcibiades' 'private' life and the way he used it can help explain the story of his stormy relationship with the Athenians.

The paradoxical nature of this relationship was observed and ironically depicted by Aristophanes in *Frogs* in 405 B.C. At the end of the play the god Dionysus is in search of a decisive question to put to Aeschylus and Euripides to enable him to decide which one deserved to be brought back from Hades to Athens. The question he comes up with is this: 'What should be done about Alcibiades?' Euripides asks what the attitude of the city is towards the deposed general. Dionysus replies: 'She desires him, she hates him, but she longs to have him.' Athens is like a lover, sexually attracted to her political partner, but at the same time hating him: 'odi et amo'. Even now, two years after deposing him for the second time, Athens cannot live 'with or without' Alcibiades.

There was plenty about Alcibiades to explain the fascination and attraction side of the Athenian attitude. First, his ancestry (which meant an awful lot to Athenians even in the late 5th century): Alcibiades was descended from the most aristocratic of Athenians and closely related to the family of Pericles. Then there was his extraordinary physical attractiveness, also something more valued by the beauty-loving Athenians than by us. Lastly, his rhetorical skills, or rather his ability to put into speech the aspirations of the Athenians and the image they had of themselves. As he spoke, the passion he was able to stir up in his Athenian audience for great deeds was somehow akin to the passionate attraction they were feeling toward the beautiful Alcibiades himself.

A suspicious character

So much for the desire. But there were also many things about Alcibiades to excite suspicion. He pursued a lifestyle of aristocratic decadence, frittering away his large fortune on the rearing of race horses to win prizes and honour for himself in the Panhellenic games. He belonged to a 'right-wing' dining society, whose secret activities were a deliberate challenge to the political and religious values of the city. This group, it was alleged, carried out illicit performances of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and vandalised the sacred images of the god Hermes at the dead of night. It was these allegations, in fact, which were to lead to the first exile of Alcibiades.

A further cause of suspicion was Alcibiades' association, particularly in his youth, with prominent intellectuals. This meant, most famously, Socrates. According to Plato, Socrates was the only person ever to resist the irresistible erotic attraction of Alcibiades: in the *Symposium* he has Alcibiades himself describe how he crept naked into Socrates' bed in a vain attempt to seduce the philosopher. Socrates' desire was for a greater good, the improvement of the soul of Alcibiades, but unfortunately for Athens, the attempt of Socrates to seduce his young admirer with philosophy turned out to be equally unsuccessful. Alcibiades, like other aristocrats of his generation, sought the company not only of Socrates, but of the sophists, men like Protagoras and Gorgias. Hindsight allows us to regard these figures as important thinkers, but to contemporary Athenians they could be

seen as crackpots and atheists, men who disrupted the stable religious and political structure of the city. The connection with Alcibiades and his dining-society mates was an obvious one to make. In fact, many of the contemporaries of Alcibiades who associated with Socrates and the sophists went on to become opponents of democracy (several were among the notorious Thirty Tyrants for example). In turn, Socrates' connection with Alcibiades was one of the main factors in the background leading to the philosopher's execution at the hands of the Athenians in 399 B.C.

In Thucydides book 6, Alcibiades is made to express his own attitude towards democracy. He calls it 'acknowledged stupidity'. Alcibiades' aristocratic superiority, hacked up by the sense of intellectual superiority he had acquired from his exposure to sophistic theory, allowed him to see the transparent folly of the established constitution of his own city. Later on, Thucydides himself tells us that Alcibiades didn't give a damn whether Athens was ruled by a democracy or an oligarchy, so long as he himself was in charge.

Alcibiades' sexual exploits

Now we come to his sexual exploits, a frequent topic of fun in contemporary comedy. Later generations of enemies of Alcibiades, and sensationalist biographers, have turned Alcibiades into more of a sexual athlete than he has any serious chance of really being. According to these later stories, Alcibiades is supposed to have slept with, among others, Socrates, Anytus (who was later the accuser of Socrates at his trial), a captive woman of Melos, the island whose inhabitants he was supposed to have had put to death, various famous courtesans, the Spartan queen Timaea, Alcibiades' own sister, his daughter, and (in one version) apparently his mother. For all that it may have become fashionable to invent partners for Alcibiades, the fact of his sexual extravagance is hard to dispute.

Did Alcibiades care about the damage this sort of behaviour might do him? There is a story in Plutarch that the young Alcibiades once cut off the tail of a dog he owned, a particularly handsome one. The story quickly spread about Athens and everyone fell to blaming him for despoiling the animal. But when his friends brought these landers to his attention, he laughed and said only: 'That's exactly what I wanted: now everyone in Athens is talking about *me*.'

We might perhaps imagine that Alcibiades made mistakes in his private life, but hoped that the Athenians would overlook them and think rather of his talents and achievements in his management of public affairs. This syndrome is familiar to us today from the cases of public figures like Bill Clinton and Paddy Ashdown. It is also in fact the defence adopted by Alcibiades in his speech in Thucydides book 6: 'My opponents attack my private life, but this does not prevent me from carrying out the business of the city'. But look how he goes on: 'In any case, it is only right that you should feel yourselves inferior to me, for I *am* better. Great

men like me generally find themselves hated in their own lifetimes: only later are they valued as they deserve.' Alcibiades apparently celebrates his own individual greatness and superiority as a means of enhancing his image among the Athenians. (We could hardly imagine a speech of this sort in the mouth of a modern politician!) Alcibiades' private lifestyle too (despite his claims to want to separate public and private) may have been, at least partly, a deliberate attempt to appeal to his fellow citizens' love of flamboyant aristocrats and outrageous behaviour (rather as television audiences today still enjoy the antics of the loathsome aristocrats in *Brideshead Revisited*).

By-passing the city

If so, his tactic was a dangerous one, because, of course, this is the sort of thing that also leads to suspicion. In particular, Alcibiades was suspected of regarding himself as beyond the authority and established laws of the city, as a private power in his own right. The Athenians interpreted his behaviour as an indication that he aspired to making himself tyrant. This fear stemmed not only from his *attitude* displayed in private (in the bedrooms of unsuspecting Athenian husbands) or in public (as the speech above), but also from his behaviour in more practical matters. Alcibiades (by 407 at least) controlled private castles in Thrace, and his own force of Thracian mercenary soldiers, and he commanded extensive influence through networks of personal friendships, with aristocrats in other Greek cities and with prominent Persians, that by-passed the city. Thus, when he was exiled for the first time in 415, he was able to get round the punishment of the city, by finding his own fortune outside and independent of Athens. In fact it was Alcibiades' personal power and influence outside the city that was paradoxically what made the city so anxious to have him back.

Recent developments in political style in Athens made Alcibiades' attitude even more noticeable. Pericles, and Alcibiades' contemporary politicians, preferred to keep quiet about their private sources of influence if they had any, and to suppress their private lives and their own individuality when they appeared in the public eye. The idea was to show that they subordinated themselves to the will of the Athenian people. Alcibiades' decision to adopt precisely the opposite tactics could be seen as a way of distinguishing his public image from those of his rivals.

We can see, then, that it was precisely the things that made Alcibiades so attractive to the Athenians that also led them to regard him as suspicious and dangerous. His private life, which challenged the traditional rules of personal behaviour in such an attractive way, produced at the same time the fear that he was unwilling to live within the normal boundaries imposed by the city. His aristocratic splendour and precocious individuality suggested a person who could not accept the 'equality' demanded by democracy. And his personal networks of influence, which Athens needed so badly in the last years of their struggle against Sparta, carried with them the danger of a power so great as to be an

alternative to that of the city. The Athenians' ambivalent attitude towards Alcibiades may even reflect an ambiguity at the very root of Athenian democracy, which professed equality but was still held in thrall by Alcibiades, and which aimed to achieve its ends through 'people power', but turned out still to need powerful individuals. No wonder Athens couldn't make up her mind about Alcibiades!

The life of Alcibiades ends in Phrygia in 404 B.C. Appropriately enough for a figure who excited such controversy not only during his lifetime but after it, there are several versions of his death. In one, he is assassinated by agents of the Persians (or the Spartans, or the Thirty Tyrants, or some combination of these) as he was making his way to the court of the Great King of Persia to beg assistance for Athens, leading perhaps to a triumphant return to the city he loved, and naturally enough, to his personal supremacy. Others say he was simply murdered by the local population, angry at his seduction of a local girl. I prefer the first version, a fitting end for a man whose extraordinary patriotism could only be satisfied by an Athens in which he himself was supreme.

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